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### War without Terms

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On 21 August 1971, the black prison activist George Jackson was killed as he tried to escape from California's San Quentin prison. Only twenty-nine years old, he had spent the last ten years of his life behind bars, much of it in solitary confinement. Despite his physical isolation, he had become an acclaimed writer, a high-ranking member of the Black Panther Party, a leader of the prison rights movement, and a symbol of black resistance throughout the country. In death, as in life, he was a figure that polarized American opinion. To many conservative Americans, he was a common criminal, an advocate of racial terrorism, and perhaps a murderer. For many African Americans and members of the New Left, he was a symbol of black pride; he was a fallen warrior in the struggle against white privilege. An article in the *New York Times*, published three days after his death, observed that he had been 'A talented leader, a sensitive man...and political thinker of great persuasiveness'.<sup>1</sup>

While literary scholars have examined Jackson's writing and cultural significance extensively, historians lag behind.<sup>2</sup> Until recently, Eric Cummins's 1994 publication *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Rights Movement* was the only historical study to place Jackson's political thinking within the wider context of radical prison organizing in the

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1. 'Death of a Brother', *New York Times* (24 August 1971).

2. For literary analysis see: B. Conniff, 'The Prison Writer as Ideologue: George Jackson and the Attica Rebellion', in D. Quentin Miller (ed.) *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States* (Jefferson NC, 2005); L. Bernstein, 'The Age of Jackson: George Jackson and the Culture of American Prisons in the 1970s', *Journal of American Culture*, 30 (2007), pp. 310-323; P. Caster, *Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth Century U.S. Literature and Film* (Columbus OH, 2008); B. Jarvis, *Cruel and Unusual Punishment and U.S. Culture* (London, 2004).

Bay Area.<sup>3</sup> In a chapter devoted to analyzing Jackson's role within the movement, Cummins presents him as a victim of the Left's obsession with the 'defiant black male outlaw'.<sup>4</sup> Using the autobiographies and writing of Jackson's closest supporters and friends, Cummins argues that the revolutionary status of George Jackson was 'almost wholly constructed by opposing Bay Area groups'.<sup>5</sup> Dan Berger's *Captive Nation*, published in 2014, started the process of constructing a counter narrative to Cummins's work. Berger examines the 'cross-cutting narratives in which both Jackson the person and *Soledad Brother* the book were distinct figures among a large cast of actors.' *Captive Nation* is more sensitive to Jackson's relationship with activists beyond the white New Left and pays greater attention to his political outlook during the earlier years of his incarceration.<sup>6</sup>

*Captive Nation* opens up a revisionist perspective upon Jackson's political life; however, many gaps remain in historians' understanding of the processes by which he emerged as a figure of international renown. The ongoing emphasis upon events *outside* California's prisons and upon Jackson as a *symbol* of prisoner resistance means that the

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3. Eric Cummins's *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford CA, 1994), pp. 150-186.

4. Ibid., p. 170.

5. Ibid, p. 170.

6. D. Berger, *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill NC, 2014), p. 96. Berger's study makes the most decisive break with Cummins's focus upon the New Left. Rebecca Hill's *Men, Mobs, and Law: Anti-Lynching and Labor Defense in US Radical History* (Durham NC, 2008) also contributes a chapter on George Jackson, but continues the trend of considering Jackson's symbolic relationship with predominantly white radicals outside the prison walls—in this case, the Communist Party.

existing literature focuses largely upon his life after 1968, when he first emerged as a figure of national interest. If historians are to fully understand Jackson's evolution from petty criminal to political activist, he needs to be placed within a longer history of black prisoners' radicalization. Furthermore, the concentration upon Jackson's relationship with white radicals outside the prison walls has overshadowed the important role he played within the black power movement. Over the last decade, the field has seen an outpouring of scholarly work on the movement. Dubbed 'New Black Power Studies', this research has revolutionized the field's understanding of post-1945 black radicalism. By rejecting the traditional view of black power as a destructive and violent force, historians are revealing the ways in which the movement empowered marginalized groups to engage in protest that demanded a radical redistribution of political, social, and economic power. However, as historians Van Gosse and David Garrow have both noted, the relationship between the black power movement and African American prisoners remains an understudied area.<sup>7</sup> This article therefore offers an alternative perspective upon Jackson in three ways. Firstly, it seeks to refocus historians' attention *inside* the penal system and thereby advance historical understanding of how Jackson was part of a much wider process of prisoner politicization that was already underway before his incarceration in 1960. Secondly, it seeks to rebalance the current emphasis upon the cultural aspects of Jackson's life and his symbolic value to radical groups.

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7. P. Joseph, 'Black Liberation Without Apology: Reconceptualizing the Black Power Movement', *Black Scholar* 31 (2001), pp. 2-19; P. Joseph, 'The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field', *Journal of American History* 96 (2009), pp. 751-76. D. Garrow, 'Picking Up the Books: The New Historiography of the Black Panther Party', *Reviews in American History*, 35 (2007), pp. 350-370; V. Gosse, 'A Movement of Movements: The Definition and Reperiodization of the New Left', in R. Rosenzweig and J-C Agnew (eds.) *A Companion to Post-1945 America* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 277-302.

Thirdly, it aims to offer a counter-perspective to the current focus upon Jackson's relationship with the predominantly white New Left to explore in greater depth his role within the black power movement, and specifically the Black Panther Party. Taken as a whole, this research emphasizes the politicizing potential of incarceration and African American prisoners' agency in challenging the white-controlled prison power structure. It also presents the American penal system as a locus of black power activism. While African American prisoners were physically isolated, radical black ideology permeated the prison walls.

Born in Chicago in 1941, Jackson was the first child of Robert and Georgia Jackson.<sup>8</sup> During his early teenage years, Jackson became involved in criminal activity. Early on, he engaged in petty theft.<sup>9</sup> Over the following years, he stopped attending school and moved toward more serious crimes, including mugging.<sup>10</sup> In 1956, Robert Jackson decided to remove his son from the deteriorating social conditions of the projects and relocated to Los Angeles. However, the family's move only drew Jackson further in to gang culture and criminal activity. In 1960, Jackson was convicted of stealing seventy dollars from a gas station during an armed robbery. His guilty plea brought him a prison term of from one year to life under California's indeterminate sentencing policy. Repeatedly denied parole, he remained in prison for the remaining eleven years of his life.<sup>11</sup>

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8. Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, p. 31, p. 124.

9. Ibid., pp. 8-9.

10. Ibid., p. 29.

11. Arrest record, George Lester Jackson, 7 May 1972, FBI records, George Lester Jackson, part 4. Available at:

<http://vault.fbi.gov/George%20Lester%20Jackson/George%20Lester%20Jackson%20Part%205%20of%205/view>. (Accessed 10 May 2014).

By 1960, California's prison system had emerged as the poster-child for liberals' program of crime prevention and rehabilitation.<sup>12</sup> Its program of 'individualized treatment', including psychological assessment, therapy, and education, reflected the prevailing view that criminality was a symptom of mental dysfunction. As in many other states, this faith in scientific models of criminal behavior was reflected in the adoption of a whole new language. The prison became a correctional center and guards were now correctional officers. Those 'residents' who could not conform to their treatment program were to be placed in 'adjustment centers', which became the new term for solitary confinement. The indeterminate sentence became the primary means by which a prisoner's rehabilitation was to be measured. Under this new regime, the parole board, which included psychologists and educators, would assess the degree of a prisoner's rehabilitation on a yearly basis; once an inmate had been successfully 'treated', they would be released.<sup>13</sup> Beneath this rhetoric of treatment lay a penal system steeped in the brutality of its earlier years. Inmates told of terrible living conditions, arbitrary and extreme violence, and the pressure of living in an

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12. For more general commentary on rehabilitation see F. Allen, *The Decline of the Rehabilitative Ideal: Penal Policy and Social Purpose* (New Haven CT, 1981); R. McGee, *Prisons and Politics* (Lexington MA, 1981); M. Gottschalk, *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, 2006); J. Simon, *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear* (New York NY, 2007).

13. G. Jackson, 'On the Indeterminate Sentencing', January 1971, folder 11, box 47, series 2, Huey Newton Papers, Stanford University Archives, California (hereafter HN papers); J. Sloan, 'The Pre-Board Hearing', in R. Minton, (ed.) *Inside Prison: American Style* (New York NY, 1971), pp. 157-163.

environment where prisoners were controlled by the guards' reign of terror.<sup>14</sup> The parole board and its role in assessing a convict's rehabilitation became the focus of frustration by prisoners, who recognized that any show of resistance to prison authorities was equated with a failure to be rehabilitated. 'You are told upon arrival here that you *must adjust*...[to] this unimaginable horror *before* you will be considered *socially responsible* enough to be placed back into *free* society', one Folsom inmate wrote.<sup>15</sup> At the bottom of the pile were black prisoners. San Quentin, Soledad, and Folsom were heavily segregated during the 1950s, while correctional officers were entirely white. Racism seeped in to every aspect of the prison environment and left African Americans vulnerable to racial violence from both prison guards and other prisoners.<sup>16</sup> Sociologist John Irwin, who worked with San Quentin prisoners

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14. B. Aptheker, 'Social Functions of Prisons in the United States', reprinted in A. Davis (ed.) *If They Come in the Morning. Voices of Resistance* (London, 1971), pp. 45-52; 'The Black Hole of Soledad' in Minton, *Inside Prison*, pp. 123-33; N. Sloan, 'The Psychiatric Unit', in Minton, *Inside Prison*, pp. 136-47; Letter from George F. Myron, June 1970, reprinted in Eve Pell (ed.) *Maximum Security: Letters from Prison* (New York NY, 1972), pp. 41-61; Letter from John Clutchette, n.d., reprinted in Pell (ed.) *Maximum Security*, pp. 137-38; T.L. Menewether, 'A Chronicle of Three Years in the Hole' reprinted in E. Olin Wright (ed.) *The Politics of Punishment: A Critical Analysis of Prisons in America* (New York NY, 1973), pp. 173-98.

15. Italics are in the original text. Letter from Thomas Clark, July 6 1970 in Pell (ed.) *Maximum Security*, p. 35.

16. Black Caucus Report, 'Treatment of Prisoners at California Training Facility at Soledad Central', July 1970, 7-8 and appendix 6-7, folder 3, box 49, Jessica Mitford Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Texas (hereafter JM Papers); 'Prison Inmates Pen Notes of Inhuman, Cruel Atrocity', *Los Angeles Sentinel*

during the 1960s and 1970s, observed that black prisoners, more than any other group, were acutely aware of the disparity between the rhetoric of rehabilitation and the reality of prison life.<sup>17</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, their frustration and anger at the system that incarcerated them meshed with the changing racial conditions outside the prison to produce a band of politicized black inmates that dominated the state's radical prison rights movement.

Like American society in general, the penal system that Jackson entered in 1960 was on the verge of racial revolution. For more than a decade, swirling undercurrents of discontent among black prisoners had slowly eroded officials' ability to maintain a strict racial hierarchy. Sociologist Ronald Berkman commented upon black prisoners' 'heightened sense of awareness, pride, and political knowledge' during this period.<sup>18</sup> John Irwin observed that challenges to the racial order became more commonplace as the decade progressed. African Americans 'steadily moved away from their acceptance of the Jim Crow arrangement that prevailed in prison and began to assume equality in the prison informal world'.<sup>19</sup> During the early 1960s, most challenges to the racial order focused upon wresting control of

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(September 3 1970); 'How Long to Wait, How Long?', *Berkeley Barb* (16-22 February 1968).

17. J. Irwin, *Prisons in Turmoil* (Boston MA, 1980), pp. 62-71; Letter from Sherman J. Warner, February 1971, reprinted in Pell (ed.) *Maximum Security*, pp. 116-26. For a detailed critique of the racist application of rehabilitative measures see 'The Self Perpetuating System', folder 4, box 6, Angela Davis Legal Defense Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, New York.

18. R. Berkman, *Opening the Gates: The Rise of the Prisoners' Movement* (Lexington MS, 1979), p. 41.

19. Irwin, *Prisons in Turmoil*, p. 62.



communal areas from white and Chicano prisoners, who determinedly resisted such challenges to the traditional tripartite system of race relations. By 1963, the neo-Nazi group the Bluebirds had become a powerful force among San Quentin's white prisoners. In response the Capones, later to be known as the Wolfpack, was created among black prisoners, of which Jackson was a founding member. Fellow convicts Luis Talamantez and James Carr, both of whom held close friendships with Jackson from early on in his incarceration, recalled that he was heavily involved in gang culture during the early 1960s. Talamantez recalled: 'George...belonged to a prison gang, the Capone Gang....George Jackson had a very bad reputation with the administration as being a black thug, pressuring other prisoners and stuff'.<sup>20</sup> Between 1962 and 1967, six charges of violent attacks upon white and Chicano prisoners were added to his prison record. He soon became notorious among prisoners and guards alike for his fighting ability. California's penal system was in the grip of the most violent era in its history as black inmates battled to assume dominance and white inmates responded with an equally determined defense. The 'never ending race war' between San Quentin convicts during the early 1960s earned it the nickname 'the Gladiator School'. One San Quentin convict recalled that the penitentiary 'was plagued by racial incidents'. Likewise, James Carr, who would become one of Jackson's closest supporters, observed 'we had a full-blown race war on our hands'.<sup>21</sup>

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20. Cummins, *The Rise and Fall*, p. 156.

21. J. Carr, *Bad: The Autobiography of James Carr* (London, 1975), p. 106; G. Saladin, 'Racism I' in Minton (ed.), *Inside Prison*, pp. 82-83; M. Maguire, 'Racism II' in Minton (ed.) *Inside Prison*, pp. 84-95; G. Saladin, 'Racism III, San Quentin: Riot for Graft' in Minton (ed.) *Inside*, pp. 96-111.

As authorities struggled to contain this groundswell of racial violence, they were also confronted with the growing popularity of the Nation of Islam (NOI) amongst inmates. Having first recruited black convicts during the 1940s, the organization experienced a period of growth inside America's penal system during the late 1950s. Alongside California, correctional institutions in New York, New Jersey, Illinois, and the District of Columbia became sites of a rapidly expanding prison membership for the NOI. Its religious black nationalist ideology, which combined racial separatism, economic independence, psychological empowerment, and a moral critique of black urban life, proved to be highly attractive to black inmates seeking to vent their frustration and anger.<sup>22</sup> By 1961, the organization had grown so rapidly that prison wardens and government officials issued warnings that the group was undermining the 'racial harmony' of their correctional institutions.<sup>23</sup> Subject to solitary confinement, physical recriminations, and behavior modification treatment, NOI prisoners launched a legal battle to secure constitutional protection. Despite such repression, the NOI grew in strength. Eldridge Cleaver, who would become a central figure in the Black Panther Party, converted to the Nation of Islam in 1958 following his incarceration in San Quentin Penitentiary. He recalled: 'The Muslims were able

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22. Z. Colley, "'All America is a Prison': The Nation of Islam and the Politicization of African American Prisoners, 1955-1965', p. 2, p. 48 (May 2014) *Journal of American Studies*, pp. 393-415.

23. 'Muslim Negroes Suing the State', *New York Times* (19 March 1961); 'Muslims A Problem in Prison', *Trenton Evening Times* (1 November 1962); 'Muslims Studied in Jersey Prison', *New York Times* (8 November 1962); Testimony of Dr. Henri Yaker to the Supreme Court of New Jersey in *Cooke v. Tramburg*, 14 December 1964. Available at [http://www.leagle.com/xmlResult.aspx?page=3&xmlDoc=196455743NJ514\\_1439.xml&docbase=CSLWAR1-1950-1985&SizeDisp=7](http://www.leagle.com/xmlResult.aspx?page=3&xmlDoc=196455743NJ514_1439.xml&docbase=CSLWAR1-1950-1985&SizeDisp=7) (accessed 4 February 2012).

to carry out a systematic program of proselytizing among the great pool of potential converts found in every prison. During his stay in prison, every black inmate was exposed to the Black Muslims' teachings'.<sup>24</sup> Authorities resorted to frequent transfers of 'racial agitators' around the state's penitentiaries in an attempt to undermine their message of racial unity and protest. During the early 1960s, the question of how to contain the combustible mix of political agitating and racial violence reverberated throughout the state's penal system.

The challenge facing historians is to understand how Jackson fitted into the increasingly militant racial politics inside prisons during the early years of his incarceration. The most commonly used source of information on Jackson's ideological development is his collection of letters written to family and friends between 1964 and 1970, and published as *Soledad Brother* in 1970. Unable to take the lead in editing the collection, Jackson handed over responsibility to a white Bay Area radical, Gregory Armstrong. As Eric Cummins argues, Armstrong had his own agenda in taking on this role; his heavy editing of the collection 'highlighted Jackson's personal prison struggle...but conveniently omitted any reference to his more mercenary gang involvements.' The book portrayed Jackson as 'an archetypal victim of American racism.'<sup>25</sup>

*Soledad Brother's* silence on the period up to 1964 speaks volumes; Jackson's involvement in the prison's internal economy and seemingly mindless acts of violence did

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24. E. Cleaver, 'Prisons: The Muslims' Decline' in F. Browning et al (eds.) *Prison Life: A Study of the Explosive Conditions in America's Prisons* (New York NY, 1972), p. 100. Also see J. Irwin, *Prisons in Turmoil* (Boston MA, 1980), p. 69.

25. Cummins, *The Rise and Fall*, pp. 173-75.

not sit well with the New Left's idealization of the man.<sup>26</sup> Whereas white radicals preferred to see a decisive split between Jackson's pre- and post-1967 life, his immersion in racial conflict and gang activity before 1965 was an integral part of his evolving political awareness. Despite his critique of Armstrong's ulterior motives, Eric Cummins compounds the problematic nature of *Soledad Brother* by suggesting a rather sudden break between gang leader and political activist during 1967 and 1968. 'For some reason,' Cummins writes, Jackson's behavior began to change. He cites Talamantez: 'In the middle of 1967 or '68 somehow or other George Jackson started becoming political...I don't think it was before that because in 1966...he was still pretty much into people that owed him....He collected debts at discounts'.<sup>27</sup> By choosing to emphasize the influence of post-1967 New Left groups upon Jackson, the traditional narrative of his life divorces his radicalization from the wider racial milieu in which he was exposed to black nationalist ideologies. A racially driven political culture was already well-developed in California's penitentiaries by the late 1950s, and African American prisoners were far from apolitical in their outlook before 1967. Jackson himself located the first step of his politicization during his first year in Soledad, when he met a group of older, politicized black convicts. 'I met a brother by the name of George', he explained in an interview, 'who introduced me to Marx, Engels; made me read the Communist Manifesto'. It appears that Jackson was not the only convict to have been influenced by this group of inmates. W.L. Nolen, who would become Jackson's closest friend

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26. 'On the Left', FBI records, George Lester Jackson; Memo from Mr. A. Jones to Mr.

Bishop, n.d., FBI. records, George Lester Jackson, part 4. Available at

<http://vault.fbi.gov/George%20Lester%20Jackson/George%20Lester%20Jackson%20Part%204%20of%205/view> (accessed 10 May 2013). J. Durden-Smith, *Who Killed George Jackson?* (New York NY, 1973), pp. 198-200.

27. Cummins, *The Rise and Fall*, pp. 156-57.

and supporter, likewise cited this band of older prisoners as the origins of his politicization.<sup>28</sup> Nolen and Jackson may have been referring to the Afro-American Nationalist Organization, which operated in San Quentin from the early 1960s through to 1965. In 1973, a former San Quentin prisoner, Arthur Smith, testified before the House of Representatives Committee on Internal Security that the organization comprised of a small group of militant black prisoners, which was politically active and functioned as a racial defense organization.<sup>29</sup> The presence of radical black prisoners in California's penal system during the early 1960s suggests that Jackson and Nolen were part of a longer tradition of covert black radicalism, which embraced Marxist theory and sat aside from the Nation of Islam's emphasis upon self-help. Additional evidence of a more gradual radicalization of Jackson is provided by Jo Durden-Smith, a journalist who investigated Jackson's death, and James Carr, both of whom agree that Jackson was engaging with various political theories during the early 1960s. In his posthumously published autobiography, Carr pinpoints a change in Jackson's outlook as coming in mid-1962. A group of 12 prisoners, including Carr and Jackson, had attacked white prisoners in revenge for the stabbing of a young black prisoner named Johnson. They were placed in Soledad's Adjustment Center, or the 'Hole', for 29 days.<sup>30</sup> 'Since that time in the Hole at Soledad', Carr explained, 'George had been deepening his political philosophy....According to George, the new black man was being formed in the struggles for

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28. J. Mitford, 'A Talk with George Jackson', *New York Times* (13 June 1971); Ted Szulc, 'George Jackson Radicalizes the Brothers in Soledad and San Quentin', *New York Times* (1 August 1971).

29. Testimony of Lee Arthur Smith, *Revolutionary Activities Directed Toward the Administration of Penal or Correctional Systems*, Hearing before the House of Representatives Committee on Internal Security, July 24-25 1973, part 3, pp. 1239, pp. 1243.

30. Durden-Smith, *Who Killed George Jackson?*, p. 198; Carr, *Bad*, pp. 87-88.

national liberation going on in the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Guinea and Mozambique'.<sup>31</sup> Prison authorities agreed that mid-1962 brought a 'changed attitude' in Jackson and it was from this point that they identified him as a leading figure in black resistance within the prison.<sup>32</sup>

While *Soledad Brother* is a problematic source, Jackson's letters between 1964 and 1967 likewise suggest that his activism was grounded in a longer-term exposure to political philosophy. Behind much of his thinking lay the belief that American capitalism was the cornerstone of black inequality: it had replaced 'chattel slavery [with] economic slavery' and thereby forced many to resort to crime to survive. Arguing that '70 to 80 percent of all crime in the U.S. is perpetrated by blacks', he explained: 'the sole reason for this is that 98 percent of our number live below the poverty level in bitter and abject misery!'.<sup>33</sup> Like other radical activists during the mid-1960s, this sense of frustration pushed him to look for examples of revolutionary action outside the United States. By late 1964, Jackson had started to place American racism within an international, anti-colonial context. He advised his father 'The events in the Congo, Vietnam, Malaya, Korea, and here in the U.S. are taking place all for the

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31. Ibid. 106; 'George Jackson: Teacher & Organizer—Interview with Jimmy Carr', *War Behind Walls*, p. 3. Political Prisoners folder, Papers of the Revolutionary Action Movement. Available at [http://www.conquest-histvault.com/pdfs/010629/010629\\_012\\_0389/010629\\_012\\_0389\\_From\\_1\\_to\\_108.pdf](http://www.conquest-histvault.com/pdfs/010629/010629_012_0389/010629_012_0389_From_1_to_108.pdf).

(Accessed 20 June 2014).

32. 'Jackson an Enigma in Life and Death to Friends and Police', *New York Times* (20 September 1971).

33. Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, p. 68.

same reason'.<sup>34</sup> Inspired by these struggles, he wrote of his desire to leave America and live in Angola, Ghana, or the Congo.<sup>35</sup> Jackson's emphasis upon a Marxist and anti-colonial interpretation of American racism is reflective of black radical thinking during this period.<sup>36</sup> This corresponds to his claim that his earliest readings of political philosophy came via Marx, Engels, and the Communist Manifesto. It also reflects the porosity of the prison walls: despite prisoners' physical isolation, radical philosophies reached inside the penitentiaries and helped shape inmates' analysis of their place within American society.<sup>37</sup>

Ironically, it was during 1967 that the most extreme pronouncements on American racism disappeared from his writing; Jackson later confirmed that this was an attempt to convince authorities, who read his letters prior to posting, that he had been rehabilitated.<sup>38</sup> However, while Jackson was projecting an image of conformity to the authorities, he made the leap from political theorist to political activist. In late 1966, Jackson and Nolen began to recruit inmates to underground political education classes. The two men schooled inmates on Marx, Mao Tse-Tung, Lenin, and Franz Fanon, while developing their plans for a violent assault upon white America. Jackson explained that by forming the classes, he sought to

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34. Ibid., pp. 43-44.

35. Ibid., p. 38, p. 58.

36. On the influence of Marxism and anti-colonialism upon black radical thought see R. D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston MA, 2002).

37. Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, p. 16; Mitford, 'A Talk with George Jackson'.

38. Jackson confirmed this in a 1971 interview; see Szulc, 'George Jackson Radicalizes the Brothers'.

transform ‘the black criminal mentality into a black revolutionary mentality’.<sup>39</sup> They viewed political education as the first step in the formation of a cadre of revolutionary activists who would rise up against their captors. What is currently missing from studies of Jackson’s life is the wider social context within which he made this transition to political activist. Indeed, one of the most important lessons of Jackson’s life is the way in which it opens a window on to the most turbulent period in the history of America’s penal system. Historians’ interest in representations of Jackson brings an implication of him as exceptional: a figure who stood aside from other prisoners by virtue of his writing and notoriety within radical circles. Yet when one looks to the undercurrents of racial conflict within California’s penitentiaries during this period, it becomes clear that Jackson’s life was reflective of much deeper changes in black prisoners’ outlook.

During the early 1960s, challenges to the racial status quo were most commonly expressed via arbitrary acts of racial violence; however, a turning point came when, on 16 January 1967, 1200 of San Quentin’s convicts—the majority of the prison’s black population—refused to report to work in protest of racist and brutal treatment by guards. This example of unified protest opened up a new era in prison race relations. One striking prisoner observed that there was a new sense of ‘togetherness’ among the inmates during the strike.<sup>40</sup> Later that day, the body of white inmate William E. Walker was discovered. On 18 January, with the strike coming to an end, 3000 prisoners took part in a race riot, which brought the death of two men and numerous injuries. During the late 1960s, sociologists studying

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39. G. Jackson, ‘Tribute to Three Slain Brothers’, *Black Panther Newspaper* (16 January 1971); Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, p. 16.

40. ‘Using Racism at San Quentin,’ *Ramparts* (January 1970); J. Fillmore, ‘Strike’ reprinted in Minton (ed.) *Inside Prison*, pp. 69-75.



California's penal system identified the 1967 strike and race riot as a pivotal event in this period of prisoner politicization. Robert Minton and Stephen Rice observed it 'acted as a catalyst for channeling the deep discontent of the prisoners into a unified, political protest'.<sup>41</sup> In the aftermath of the riot, a group of politically active prisoners arranged a truce between the Capones and the Bluebirds. They produced an underground newspaper, the *Outlaw*, in which they called for prisoners of all races to challenge official violence. Further examples of organized protest took place over the following year. In January 1968, San Quentin's death row prisoners went on a hunger strike. The following month, 500 black prisoners refused to report to work in protest of brutal treatment by San Quentin's guards and prison racism. Two months later, 50 black prisoners held in the Hole went on hunger strike. They issued a ten-point manifesto, which included demands for the release of all black prisoners from solitary confinement and a semi-annual fund drive for the prison's Black Panther Party chapter. It was signed 'Panther Power to the Vanguard.' Another strike took place in San Quentin during August. In nearby Soledad prison, 700 black prisoners followed the example of their San Quentin counterparts and staged a strike in complaint of racist and brutal practices within the prison.<sup>42</sup> It appears that authorities failed to understand that such protests were the

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41. 'Using Racism at San Quentin'.

42. 'The Outlaw', 1 July 1968 reprinted in Minton (ed.) *Inside Prison*, pp. 15-17; 'Death Row Food Strike Ends', *New York Times* (12 January 1968); 'San Quentin Inmates Strike', *New York Times* (17 February 1968); 'San Quentin Cons to Strike', *Berkeley Barb* (26 January-1 February 1968); 'Home of the Brave', *Berkeley Barb* (2-8 February 1968); 'Freeman Backs Cons as Prison Seethes', *Berkeley Barb* (9-15 February 1968); 'Inmates Check Warden's Moves', *Berkeley Barb* (9-15 February 1968); 'At San Quentin—700 Cons Strike: Cons Risk Year as Freeman Want', *Berkeley Barb* (16-22 February 1968); 'Black Prisoners on Hunger Strike', *Independent Press-Telegram* (10 April 1969); Berkman, *Opening the Gates*, p. 60.

product of widespread prisoner discontent, preferring to believe that Jackson was personally directing and manipulating inmates. In June 1968, a California Department of Corrections memorandum recommended he be isolated in maximum security indefinitely to prevent leadership of further protests.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to prison authorities' focus upon Jackson as the cause of racial unrest, sociologists working inside California's prisons during this period offered a more nuanced explanation of the 1968 protests. It was clear to them that the move toward collective resistance was part of a grassroots radicalization; while Jackson helped give form to such discontent, it also transcended his personal leadership. Erik Olin Wright, who interviewed San Quentin prisoners during the late 1960s and early 1970s, observed that while no more than 50 inmates participated in Jackson's political education classes, far more privately expressed support for the militants' ideology and actions. He observed that the evidence 'certainly indicates that [militants] are not an isolated group'. He concluded: 'support [for radicals] is growing, their sophistication is increasing, and they are likely to be more active and 'troublesome' as time goes on'.<sup>44</sup> Alongside other sociologists, Wright identified the increasingly militant style of African American protest outside the prison walls as a major influence upon prisoners' radicalization.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, it is evident that the political activity of

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43. California Department of Corrections memorandum, 11 June 1968, folder 5, box 49, JM papers.

44. Wright, *The Politics of Punishment*, p. 140. One prisoner described his radicalization in M. Flowers, 'The Impossible Conspiracy at Soledad Prison', n.d., folder 5, box 49, JM papers.

45. Wright, *The Politics of Punishment*, pp. 143-40; Irwin, *Prisons in Turmoil*, pp. 66-72; Berkman, *Opening the Gates*, pp. 99-111; Carroll, *Hacks, Blacks, and Cons*, pp. 91-104.

Jackson, Nolen, and their supporters was intricately bound up with the rise of the black power movement across America in the post-1966 years.

Malcolm X's prison conversion to the Nation of Islam had made him the most influential leader among the group's prison membership; his split with Elijah Muhammad in 1963 undermined the NOI's influence inside the penal system. While the Nation continued to recruit prisoners, many supporters left the group and looked elsewhere for political leadership. By the time Stokely Carmichael issued his call for 'black power' in 1966, the Marxist and anti-colonial ideologies expressed by Jackson were already growing in popularity. Whereas the Nation of Islam typically held a pejorative attitude toward black criminals, the black power movement openly celebrated the revolutionary capacity of their incarcerated brothers. The tenets upon which black power rested—a rejection of integration, an emphasis upon the socio-economic origins of racism, and the right to self-defense—made it an attractive ideology to prisoners. Leo Carroll explained that during the late 1960s, African American prisoners were able to 'adapt and specify' black power ideology 'to the context of confinement' and thereby gave 'new meaning to imprisonment'.<sup>46</sup> In particular, it was the Black Panther Party's increasingly sophisticated analysis of the role of the criminal justice system within American society that appealed to prison activists.

Founded in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California, the BPP moved beyond the Nation of Islam's advocacy of self-help and economic independence to offer a Marxist, anti-colonial critique of American race relations. It embraced the concept of 'revolutionary suicide' and called upon African Americans to launch a violent revolution against the white power structure. From the outset, the party identified prisoners as a central constituency in their program; point eight of its Ten Point Program called for the 'immediate

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46. Ibid., 91.

release of all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails'.<sup>47</sup> It is no surprise that the racism of the criminal justice system strongly influenced the Black Panther Party, for it was rooted in the poorest black neighborhoods where high levels of police brutality and arrest rates made law enforcement a special focus of residents' enmity. As Jeffry Ogbar has observed, the group appealed to young, poor, black men who were most likely to have criminal records and a history of confrontation with the police.<sup>48</sup> Bobby Seale explained they targeted those 'who were on parole, on probation, who'd been in jails, who'd just gotten out of jail'. These were the 'forgotten people at the bottom of society'.<sup>49</sup>

Crucial to the expanding relationship between the Black Panther Party and radicalized prisoners was Eldridge Cleaver. Cleaver's rise to prominence within the party offers an insight into its ideological development and the reasons why convicts emerged as an important component of its program. Like Jackson, Cleaver was radicalized by his time in prison and became a member of San Quentin's Nation of Islam temple in 1958.<sup>50</sup> He broke with the NOI in 1963 and the following year, while incarcerated in Folsom prison, he started

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47. 'Black Panther Party Platform and Program', *Black Panther Newspaper* (14 June 1969).

48. J. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore, MD 2005), p. 96.

49. B. Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York, NY 1996), p. 65. While the party placed a heavy emphasis upon such recruitment activities, college students also played an important role in the party. See D. Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill NC, 2010).

50. E. Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (Columbus, OH 1968), pp. 17-36; E. Cleaver, *Target Zero: A Life in Writing* (New York NY, 2006), p. 74.

writing a series of letters and vignettes, which would be published to much acclaim as *Soul on Ice*. Shortly after his parole in 1967, he joined the Black Panther Party and soon emerged as the party's spokesman for prisoners' interests. As editor of the *Black Panther* newspaper and in *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver presented black criminality as the product of a capitalist society, and prisons as simply one part of a larger conspiracy to trap black Americans within a cycle of poverty and crime. Drawing an analogy between life in the ghettos and prison, Cleaver portrayed convicts as victims of a wider plot to keep African Americans oppressed via the criminal justice system. 'Which laws get enforced depends on who is in power', he observed.

The police do on the domestic level what the armed forces do on the international level: protect the way of life for those in power....The police are the armed guardians of the social order. The blacks are the chief domestic victims of the American social order.<sup>51</sup>

By filtering black criminality through a Marxist lens, Cleaver argued that crime was a political act of resistance against a capitalist white power structure. Following such logic, the black prisoner was no longer a criminal, but a political prisoner. By drawing upon the concept of 'politically creative' law-breaking, he formulated a vision of inmates as natural revolutionaries in a battle against American capitalism.<sup>52</sup> This ideology offered prisoners an alternative identity that looked beyond their status as criminals to place them at the heart of a future revolution, and ensured that the Black Panther Party was the central point of reference

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51. Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, p. 126.

52. For examples of these ideas in the *Black Panther Newspaper*, see: 'New York, N.Y. CORE', *Black Panther Newspaper* (23 November 1967); 'From Here to the Furnace', *Black Panther Newspaper* (16 March 1968); 'Prisoner's Report From Alameda County Jail', *Black Panther Newspaper* (10 June 1968).

for California's radical prisoners after 1968.<sup>53</sup> Correctional officers testified that the organization spread to the penal systems in other states over the following two years.<sup>54</sup> Underground libraries played a crucial role in disseminating the Black Panther's ideology, with the *Black Panther* and *Soul on Ice* readily available to convicts.<sup>55</sup>

By 1968, Jackson had become a powerful force within California's prison system. Co-founder of the Black Panther Party, Huey Newton, recalled he was 'a legendary figure' throughout the state.<sup>56</sup> It is clear that by this point Jackson had already started to develop a relationship with the Panthers after he met imprisoned party members in San Quentin during 1968. Johnny Spain recalled Jackson would pore over issues of the *Black Panther*, which were smuggled into the prison by visitors.<sup>57</sup> In late 1969, after Jackson and Nolen had been transferred to Soledad penitentiary, they formed an underground chapter of the party and

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53. For example, see Chicago Connections Newsletter, August 1971, George Jackson (Soledad Brothers) folder, box 13, Printed Ephemera Collection on Individuals, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University, New York (hereafter PECI papers).

54. Exhibit 1, *Revolutionary Activities Directed Toward the Administration of Penal or Correctional Systems*, Hearing before the House of Representatives Committee on Internal Security, March 29 and May 11 1973, part 1, pp. 185-86.

55. Szulc, 'George Jackson Radicalizes the Brothers'.

56. 'Statement by Huey P. Newton at the Revolutionary Memorial Service for George Jackson', *Black Panther Newspaper* (4 September 1971).

57. Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, p. 185; Wright, *The Politics of Punishment*, pp. 163-72.

Newton honored Jackson with the title of Chief Marshall.<sup>58</sup> Jackson's alliance with the party bolstered his position as a spokesman for radicalized prisoners and provided him with a crucial organizational connection to the outside world. For the Black Panther Party, Jackson's appointment reflected how the party had been drawn toward prisoners as a central constituency in the revolution. The arrest of Huey Newton for the murder of police officer John Frey in 1967 launched the party into a determined defense of its Supreme Commander. Under the direction of Cleaver, the 'Free Huey' campaign developed into a national movement that drew additional supporters and focused attention upon demands to 'free Huey and all political prisoners'. During 1968, Bobby Seale faced trial for his role in the Chicago Democratic convention protest and Eldridge Cleaver fled the country to Algeria after his parole was revoked. Increasing conflict between the party and law enforcement agencies pushed the concept of the prison as a site of political struggle to the forefront of its organizing.

Prison authorities were clearly disturbed by the increasing power of its militant inmates; they resorted to solitary confinement and facilitated violent confrontations with white prisoners to silence their critics. On 13 January 1970, W.L. Nolen, Alvin Miller, and Cleveland Edwards were shot and killed by guards after a fight broke out in Soledad's exercise yard. Both Nolen and Miller were known for their militant opposition to prison authorities, while Edwards apparently bore a close resemblance to Black Panther Earl Satcher.<sup>59</sup> Within days, the killings had been ruled as justifiable homicide; outrage soon

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58. L. Andrews, *Black Power, White Blood: The Life and Times of Johnny Spain* (Philadelphia PA, 2000), p. 111.

59. E. Pell, 'How a Prison Picks Its Victims,' *Ramparts* (August 1970); Letter from Earl Satcher, 14 September 1970, reprinted in Pell (ed.) *Maximum Security*, p. 162.

spread among black inmates as they challenged the official account of the shootings with a belief that the deaths had been a political assassination, especially as Nolen had filed several lawsuits protesting the racist and violent treatment meted out to him and other prisoners in the months prior to his death.<sup>60</sup> Frank Rundle, Soledad's psychiatrist, explained that inmates believed the three 'were executed because of the threat posed by their militant views and their leadership'.<sup>61</sup> Thomas Lopez Menewether, one of Nolen's supporters and fellow prison activist, reported that guards first targeted Nolen while he was in San Quentin; his killing on 13 January was, he claimed, a carefully orchestrated plan to silence Nolen's criticism of the prison authorities.<sup>62</sup> Just whether Soledad's guards played a role in provoking the 13 January riot is not clear, but if they hoped that Nolen's death would help stifle dissent, they were wrong. Min Yee, one of a three-man investigative committee sent to investigate prisoners' charges of racism and brutality, observed that in the two days after the killings 'blacks went on hunger strikes, burned prison furniture and dispatched voluminous amount of mail to their families and attorneys'.<sup>63</sup> On 16 January, Officer John Mills's body was found, viciously

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60. 'Prisoners in Soledad State Prison Murdered By Guard', *Black Panther Newspaper* (24 January 1970); 'In Soledad: Political Consciousness is the Only Answer', 1970, pp. 4-5, George Jackson (Soledad Brothers) folder, box 13, PEGI papers; Death on the Yard: The Untold Killings at Soledad and San Quentin,' *Ramparts* (10 April 1973).

61. Rundle, 'The Roots', Wright (ed.), *The Politics of Punishment*, p. 165.

62. Menewether provides a detailed account of the riot in 'Statement of facts', n.d., reprinted in Pell (ed.) *Maximum Security*, pp. 153-57. Also see Letters to Friends of the Soledad Brothers, George Jackson (Soledad Brothers) folder, box 13, PEGI papers; Letter from T.L.M. to W.L.B., 10 April 1970, folder 9, box 48, JM papers.

63. Ibid., 70; Black Caucus Report, 'Treatment of Prisoners at California Training Facility at Soledad Central', July 1970, 1-4, folder 3, box 49, JM papers.



beaten and thrown over the walkway railing. A note pinned to his body, which stated 'one down, two to go', clearly indicated that the murder was an act of retribution for the killing of the three prisoners. George Jackson and fellow prison activists Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette were arrested and charged with the guard's murder. As a life-termer, Jackson faced the death penalty. Coming on the heels of Nolen's death, militant prisoners defended the innocence of the three men and argued that the charges were just another attack against those who dared to speak out against American racism. News of the Soledad Brothers, as the three men quickly became known, spread like wildfire through California's prisons, resulting in even further racial violence and unrest.

Emboldened by such mass protest, militants abandoned their efforts to operate underground and sought to capitalize upon the radicalizing impact of Nolen's killing and the Soledad Brothers. Johnny Spain, one of Jackson's right-hand men, recalled: before the murder of Mills political education classes 'were pretty much hidden, but after George went to the hole I made 'em do it in the open. On the yard, in the chow hall, in the library, in the wing, anywhere people could meet'.<sup>64</sup> California's Director of Corrections, Raymond Procunier, identified Nolen's death as the 'most devastating thing that happened to [the penal] system'. Over the following months, recruitment to the prison's Black Panther chapter soared; having numbered less than 50, it was estimated that party membership peaked at somewhere between 300 and 500 supporters.<sup>65</sup> The politicizing impact of the case upon the wider black inmate population was seen in July 1970, when 1000 Soledad convicts staged a

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64. Cummins, *The Rise and Fall*, p. 167.

65. *Revolutionary Activities Directed Toward the Administration of Penal or Correctional Systems*, Hearing before the House of Representatives Committee on Internal Security, July 24-25 1973, part 3, p. 1184, pp. 1211-12, p. 1244, p. 1409.

strike in support of the Soledad Brothers. The following month, 800 prisoners in San Quentin conducted a sit-down protest in solidarity with Jackson, Drumgo, and Clutchette.<sup>66</sup> Min Yee wrote that the case left the prison authorities ‘reeling from the gathering inmate strength of the clandestine prison organizations....The prison system was buffeted by one blow after another’.<sup>67</sup> Jackson’s indictment also transformed him into a cause célèbre for radicals outside the penal system. In March 1970, his supporters established the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee, which soon attracted a gamut of celebrities, including Pete Seeger, Jane Fonda, Noam Chomsky, Allen Ginsburg, and Benjamin Spock.<sup>68</sup>

By the time of his indictment, Jackson had already started writing his second book. Whereas *Soledad Brother* contained a mix of his personal life and political reflection, *Blood in My Eye* spoke directly to his supporters on both sides of the prison walls. The overt political tone of *Blood in My Eye* meant it received far less mainstream attention than *Soledad Brother*, a fact that is reflected in the almost complete lack of literary studies. Such myopia is unfortunate, for Jackson himself believed *Blood in My Eye* to be his most important piece of work and a far stronger statement of his political philosophy than *Soledad Brother*. At the heart of his message was the need for a violent uprising against the American totalitarian state. ‘Armed struggle is at the very heart of the revolution’, he wrote. ‘If the

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66. ‘Striking San Quentin Prisoners Routed by Tear Gas’, *New York Times* (26 August 1970); Letter from Earl Satcher to Fay Stender, 21 September 1970, folder 9, box 49, JM papers; Browning, *Prison Life*, pp. 81-83; Wright (ed.) *The Politics of Punishment*, pp. 100-07.

67. M. Yee, *The Melancholy History of Soledad Prison: In Which a Utopian Scheme Turns Bedlam* (New York NY, 1973), p. 152; ‘Soledad Brothers Defense Committee Newsletter’, July 1971, folder 3, box 49, JM papers.

68. Yee, *The Melancholy History*, pp. 154-56.

problems of the people cannot be redressed because the necessary resources are in the hands of a relatively few families and individuals, it means we are going to have to seize this property'.<sup>69</sup> Drawing upon his reading of Engels's work, he argued that prisons stood at the heart of racial and class oppression; in doing so, he situated convicts at the center of the struggle to destroy that system. 'The sheer numbers of the prisoner class and the terms of their existence make them a mighty reservoir of revolutionary potential', he wrote in *Blood in My Eye*.<sup>70</sup> His role was to awaken convicts to this injustice and form a cadre of revolutionaries inside the penal system; thus, he sought to transform prison in to a site of resistance and elevate prisoners from downtrodden criminals to disciplined foot soldiers.<sup>71</sup> 'We've got to...turn the prison into just another front of the struggle', he claimed, 'tear it down from inside'.<sup>72</sup> As early as 1964, Jackson had pinpointed the American economic order as the principal cause of black inequality and crime. Eldridge Cleaver had reinforced this message with his portrayal of crime as a response to an oppressive capitalist state. By 1970, Jackson had taken this a step further by including white and Chicano prisoners as members of an oppressed convict class. Drawing upon his Marxist influences, he sought to awaken a sense of class identity among prisoners and identified imprisonment as 'an aspect of class

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69. Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, p. 77; G. Jackson, 'Letters from Maximum Security', folder 1, box 45, series 2, HN papers; E. Mann, *Comrade George: An Investigation into the Life, Political Thought, and Assassination of George Jackson* (New York NY, 1970), pp. 159-82.

70. Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, p. 108.

71. G. Jackson, 'Prisons, Politics, and Revolution', 21 August 1970, folder 2, box 47, series 2, HN papers.

72. George Jackson interview with Karen Wald.

struggle from the outset'.<sup>73</sup> Recognizing that the 'race war' that raged inside California's prisons only weakened their fight against capitalism, he began to preach a message of convict unity across racial lines to focus their energies upon defeating prison authorities.<sup>74</sup> While Jackson continued to believe that African Americans would stand at the vanguard of a revolution, he reserved a place for like-minded whites. 'Black, brown and white are all victims together', he wrote. Looking to a future when racial division no longer shaped American society, he predicted: 'At the end of this massive collective struggle, we will uncover our new man...He will be better equipped to wage the real struggle, the permanent struggle after the revolution—the one for new relationships between men'.<sup>75</sup> After the death of Mills, prison guards—rather than white prisoners—became the focus of retributive violence by radical inmates.<sup>76</sup> This shift in ideology pushed George Jackson to an even greater level of influence within the Black Panther Party. His eloquent pronouncements on American racism, capitalism, and the significance of the 'convict class' within revolutionary action fitted perfectly with the party's belief that the 'lumpenproletariat' would play a vital role in an uprising against the American state.

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73. Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 44, pp. 105-13; Letter to George Jackson from Herbert Aptheker, 7 May 1971, folder 11 box 44, series 2, HN papers; Letter from George Jackson to Jessica Mitford, 4 March 1971, folder 9, box 48, JM papers; Mann, *Comrade George*, pp. 95-96.

74. Letters to Friends of Soledad Brothers, pp. 1-4.

75 Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 113. A former member of Soledad's Nazi Party described his conversion to supporting Jackson in 'In Soledad: Political Consciousness is the Only Answer', p. 5.

76. Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 105-13; 'Interview with George Jackson', *Black Panther Newspaper* (3 April 1971); Szulc, 'George Jackson Radicalizes the Brothers'.

On 7 August 1970, Jackson's younger brother, Jonathon, entered the San Rafael Courthouse in Marin County, where Soledad prisoners William Christmas and Ruchell Magee were acting as witnesses for the defense of a fellow inmate, James McClain, on charges of assaulting a guard. Jonathon Jackson pulled out a sawed-off shotgun, announcing: 'All right, gentlemen. I'm taking over now'. Magee, McClain, and Christmas walked out of the courthouse with five hostages, including Judge Haley. As the men climbed into a rented van, McClain demanded the Soledad Brothers' release.<sup>77</sup> Their escape, however, was unlikely: heavily-armed police had already surrounded the courthouse and placed roadblocks in the surrounding area. Apparently without warning, police fired into the van. Jonathan Jackson, McClain, Christmas, and Judge Haley were killed in the cross-fire. In death, Jonathan Jackson became a martyr. At his funeral, a 3000 strong crowd of mourners greeted the coffin with a black power salute and Huey Newton eulogized the younger Jackson as a revolutionary 'in the truest sense'.<sup>78</sup>

Historians writing on the Black Panther Party generally pass over the shoot-out with a short description, choosing to portray it as the act of a lone, desperate individual who had

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77. 'Judge, 3 Kidnapers Shot to Death', *Palm Beach Post-Times* (8 August 1970); 'Judge, Three Others Killed In Break Try', *Pittsburgh Press* (8 August 1970); 'Judge, Three Men Die in Court Melee', *Milwaukee Sentinel* (8 August 1970); '2 Views of Courthouse Tragedy', *Washington Post* (19 August 1970); 'Courthouse Shootout Linked With Radical Movement and Killing of Black Inmates', *New York Times* (24 August 1970).

78. 'Eulogy Delivered by Huey P. Newton', *Black Panther Newspaper* (21 August 1970).

become obsessed with securing his older brother's release.<sup>79</sup> However, police informant Louis Tackwood claimed in 1973 that the Black Panther Party's Los Angeles chapter had been a driving force behind plans for 7 August and members had been training in the Santa Cruz mountains for months before the attack. They had intended to launch a three-pronged assault upon the courthouse, Marin County Civic Center, and the hijacking of a plane from San Francisco airport, which would be used to transport the Soledad Brothers to join Cleaver in Cuba.<sup>80</sup> It was an audacious plan: one that would take the Panthers' calls for violent revolution to a new height and place the Soledad Brothers at the center of that struggle. Jo Durden-Smith, who investigated Tackwood's claims, argues that in the run-up to the attack, the party's central committee in Oakland became concerned that the plans were too dangerous and would inevitably draw the party into a bloody conflict. Two days before the attack, Huey Newton was released from prison and shared the committee's concerns. The Los Angeles Panthers were instructed to withdraw.<sup>81</sup> When Jonathan Jackson arrived at the

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79. See, for example, Alkebulan, *Survival, Pending Revolution*, p. 63; P. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York NY, 2007), pp. 251-53; Tibbs, *From Black Power*, pp. 99-101.

80. L. Tackwood, *The Glasshouse Tapes: The Story of an Agent-Provocateur and the New Police Intelligence Complex* (New York NY, 1973), pp. 112-15; 'The Glass House Tapes', *Sedition* 3:4 (1973), p. 11. The journalist Jo Durden-Smith, who viewed legal documents relating to the assault, supports this account. See *Who Killed George Jackson?*, pp. 141-42. Likewise, a member of the BPP Central Committee, David Hilliard, repeats this account of the shoot-out. See *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (New York NY, 1993), pp. 301-02, p. 311.

81. Durden-Smith, *Who Killed George Jackson?*, pp. 141-44, p. 156. David Hilliard details alternative claims made at the time that it was Geronimo Pratt, head of the Los Angeles

courthouse two days later, he expected to be joined by a phalanx of Panthers, but instead carried out the attack alone.

The Los Angeles chapter had been infiltrated by police and FBI informants from its inception. It is possible that police knew of the plans in advance, courtesy of Tackwood and another highly-placed informant, Cotton Smith. It is also clear that that a division over the use of armed resistance had opened up before August 1970 between the highly militant LA chapter and the increasingly conservative central committee in Oakland.<sup>82</sup> Tackwood's version of events, therefore, appear plausible, and his statement that Newton was responsible for canceling the party's involvement is supported by a member of the central committee, David Hilliard.<sup>83</sup> What is indisputable is that party's ideological development was deeply bound up with the events of 7 August. By the summer of 1970, a combination of police violence, prosecutions, and infiltration by agent provocateurs had decimated the party's leadership and forced chapters across the country to throw all their resources into defending members in court. The party's calls to 'off the pigs' and violent rhetoric had enabled authorities to justify their attacks upon members. With the party struggling for its life, Newton turned to the concept of 'survival, pending revolution' as a less confrontational form

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chapter, who gave the order to withdraw support; a claim that has been vehemently denied by Pratt. See Hilliard, *This Side of Glory*, pp. 310-11.

82. On the LA chapter and the infiltration of informants, see J. Jeffries and M. Foley 'To Live and Die in L.A.' in J. Jeffries (ed.) *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party* (Bloomington IN, 2007), W. Churchill and J.V. Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars against the Black Panther party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston MA, 1990), pp. 77-86, pp. 94-97.

83. Hilliard, *This Side of Glory*, pp. 301-02, p. 311.

of activism, where community-organizing schemes would take center place. Newly released from prison, Newton was determined to redirect Panther efforts toward his community service program; however, his efforts to reshape party strategy were not without opposition. In exile in Algeria, Cleaver headed a faction of the party that remained loyal to its original stance of violent revolution. The ideological fissure between Cleaver and Newton was torn open by the events of 7 August. In the aftermath of the assault, Jonathan Jackson's death took on a symbolic value within the party as each side battled over its larger meaning.<sup>84</sup> Cleaver argued that the courthouse assault was the 'type of action' needed to advance the movement, which should focus upon the judicial system as its primary target. Aware of the popular support for Jonathan Jackson, Newton walked a tightrope; while he did not want to drive potential supporters into Cleaver's camp, he also could not afford to encourage further examples of violence. Thus, he applauded Jonathan Jackson's act of resistance and lauded such a 'marvelous statement of courage', but he also seized upon his death as evidence of the futility of violent revolution. He argued that by inviting retaliation from white authorities, such violent assaults ran counter to the needs of the black community and were therefore 'counterrevolutionary'.<sup>85</sup> The battle over party strategy became final in February 1971, when Newton expelled Cleaver, the party's international section, and the New York chapter. The bitter conflict over how to bring radical change to America tore the BPP apart, left imprisoned members without party support, and produced an internecine war that resulted in supporters' deaths on both sides. Whereas historians acknowledge the disastrous impact of

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84. See, for example, 'The Marin Slave Rebellion, August 7 1970', folder 3, box 49, JM papers.

85. Hilliard, *This Side of Glory*, p. 301. For one example of how Jonathan Jackson was celebrated as a revolutionary hero, see 'Free the Soledad Brothers: Jonathan Jackson', n.d., George Jackson (Soledad Brothers) folder, box 13, PEI papers.



‘the split’ upon the BPP, they have minimized the catalytic role of the San Rafael shoot-out. By presenting the courthouse assault as the sole act of Jonathan Jackson—rather than part of a much larger, Panther-directed plan to free the Soledad Brothers—the current historiography underestimates the impact of Jackson’s death. Far from being a footnote in the party’s history, the courthouse assault was a pivotal event in the party’s ideological transition from armed insurrection to community organizing.

Caught within the midst of this ideological turmoil, George Jackson appears as an obvious ally for Cleaver. Furthermore, David Hilliard claims that Jackson was aware of Newton’s reported failure to support the attack and held him personally responsible for his brother’s death.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, Jackson remained loyal to Newton and dutifully attacked Cleaver as an ‘infantile leftist’.<sup>87</sup> It is clear that Newton had strong reasons to maintain Jackson’s loyalty. The prisoner’s emphasis upon revolutionary action made him the perfect vehicle by which Newton could retain the support of the remaining elements of the party’s military wing and undercut Cleaver’s appeal.<sup>88</sup> It is harder to explain why Jackson chose to side with Newton. Cummins argues that in the closed world of maximum-security prison, Jackson was unaware that he was being manipulated by Newton and became a victim of the Supreme Commander’s ruthless efforts to protect his leadership of the party. Yet such an explanation overlooks two important factors. Firstly, it was not as easy for Newton to control the flow of information to Jackson as Cummins suggests—as reflected by the fact that Jackson was well aware of the background to the events of 7 August. During the last 18

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86. Hilliard, *This Side of Glory*, p. 380.

87. ‘Interview with George Jackson’; Jackson ‘Struggle and the Black Man’; Szulc, ‘George Jackson Radicalizes the Brothers’.

88. Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*, pp. 253-54.

months of his life, Jackson's team of lawyers provided a line of communication with supporters both inside and outside the prison walls. Interviews and letters flowed from his cell at a faster rate than ever before. Secondly, Jackson had his own reasons to maintain an alliance with Newton.<sup>89</sup> In the aftermath of his brother's death, Jackson had formed the August 7<sup>th</sup> Movement: a paramilitary organization that would undertake acts of guerrilla warfare inside and outside prison, and ultimately function as the military wing of a future revolutionary movement.<sup>90</sup> Jackson understood that he could not push forward with his plans for a violent assault on the American state without support on the outside and perceived the Panthers as bringing the best chance of success. In exchange for Jackson's loyalty, Newton agreed to assist in building up the August 7<sup>th</sup> Movement. During 1971, Jackson identified and recruited members to the Movement on both sides of the prison walls and chose Jimmy Carr to oversee the operations. Placing the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee under the control of the Black Panther Party and his sister, Penny, Jackson ordered funds to be siphoned off to purchase a jeep, weapons, and explosives.<sup>91</sup>

While he spent much of the last year of his life in solitary confinement, Jackson maintained contact with his supporters in the mainstream prison population, who persisted with their political education classes and distribution of radical literature. In October 1970, a coalition of radical and reformist prisoners succeeded in organizing a work strike at Folsom prison that was supported by almost all of the 2400 white, black, and Chicano prisoners. The

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89. Cummins, *The Rise and Fall*, pp. 213-14.

90. Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, p. 75, p. 108; Jackson, 'Struggle and the Black Man'.

91. Ibid.; 'Investigation of August Seventh Guerrilla Movement', 29 March 1975, FBI records, Black Guerrilla Family, part 1, pp. 91-98. Available at: <http://vault.fbi.gov/black-guerilla-family/black-guerilla-family-part-1-of-3/view>. (Accessed 12 May 2013).

demands mixed an attack upon prison conditions and the exploitation of prison labor with a call to free all ‘celebrated and prominent political prisoners’, including the Soledad Brothers. Lasting for a record 19 days, the Folsom strike indicated to prison authorities that radicals’ attempt to unite prisoners across racial lines was starting to take effect.<sup>92</sup> Alongside the continuing activity of political education classes and attacks upon prison guards, the Folsom strike convinced prison authorities that their institutions were on the verge of anarchy.<sup>93</sup> Jo Durden-Smith observed that, under these siege-like conditions, authorities came to see Jackson as a ‘man of almost superhuman power’, who was personally directing the attacks.<sup>94</sup> In reality, the work strikes and outbreaks of violence were a reflection of the way in which the radicals’ message had spread at the grassroots level, rather than the product of Jackson’s personal intervention. Nevertheless, authorities were convinced that he was the single greatest threat to the penal system and targeted him with a vengeance. By mid-1971, Jackson and his supporters had come to believe that authorities would stop at nothing to silence him. ‘I don’t think we can afford to be nice much longer’, Jackson wrote. ‘[T]he very last of our protection is eroding from under us....The process must be checked...or we’ll be fighting

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92. On the Folsom strike see ‘Manifesto of Folsom Inmates’, *Black Panther* (6 March 1971); Letter from Howard, 20 November 1970, reprinted in Pell (ed.) *Maximum Security*, 191-201; Letter from Hassan, 21 November 1970 reprinted in Pell (ed.) *Maximum Security*, 205-06; F. Browning, ‘Organizing Behind Bars,’ *Ramparts* (February 1972).

93. ‘Prisoners Stage Protest’, *Los Angeles Times* (5 November 1970); ‘Folsom Prisoners Remain Locked Up After Strike Attempt’, *Los Angeles Times* (7 November 1970); ‘Soledad Prisoners End Strike; Lockup At Folsom Continues’, *Los Angeles Times* (14 November 1970). A list of the many prisoner strikes and protests that took place throughout the nation’s penal system is available in ‘Prison Struggle 1970-71’, *War Behind Walls*, p. 14.

94. Durden-Smith, *Who Killed George Jackson?*, p. 216.

from a position of weakness with our backs against the wall'.<sup>95</sup> On 21 August 1971, that sense of desperation pushed George Jackson to attempt to escape from San Quentin.

As Eric Cummins observed, 1971 marked the height of the radical prison rights movement. In the year after Jackson's death, authorities intensified their repression of prison activists.<sup>96</sup> Meanwhile, the disintegration of the New Left, and especially the Black Panther Party's split, once again isolated prisoners from crucial outside assistance.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, Jackson continued to shape race relations in California's prisons after his death. In the early 1970s, members of the August 7<sup>th</sup> Movement, the Wolfpack, and imprisoned Black Panthers formed the Black Guerrilla Family. Declaring that it followed 'the spirit of George Jackson', the group called for a violent uprising against the prison system, with the ultimate aim of launching a revolutionary movement against the American state. FBI surveillance in 1974 estimated that the group had one thousand supporters spread through the California penal system and was responsible for numerous attacks and murders of white prisoners and guards.<sup>98</sup>

While authorities believed Jackson was personally directing prisoners' protests, the politicization of black convicts and the racial turmoil inside California's prisons during the

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95. Ibid., pp. 216-18; Yee, *The Melancholy History*, p. 199.

96. 'California Prison System Escalates Repression of Political Prisoners', *Black Panther Newspaper* (4 October 1971).

97. Yee, *The Melancholy History*, pp. 229-34, p. 266.

98. 'Investigation of August Seventh Movement', 13; 'Black Guerrilla Family', 18 May 1982, FBI records, Black Guerrilla Family, part 3, pp. 49-79. Available at:

<http://vault.fbi.gov/black-guerilla-family/black-guerilla-family-part-3-of-3/view>. (Accessed 14 May 2014).

1960s and 1970s was not the product of any one man. By placing Jackson's life within a larger picture of prison race relations, demographic change, and developments in black protest thought, it becomes clear that his activism was just one part of a larger process of prisoner radicalization. His appeal lay in an ability to articulate the hopes and fears of his fellow inmates, and to formulate a plan for psychological liberation. While only small numbers of prisoners in California and elsewhere chose to openly identify with Jackson's ideas, the widespread distribution of *Soledad Brother*, *Blood in My Eye*, and the *Black Panther* within prisons, as well as the many protests and riots that shook the nation's penal system in the months following his death, suggest that he had widespread support throughout the prison system. Jackson's relationship with the Black Panther Party opens up another element of his influence upon the black freedom struggle. His ability to place the prisoners' struggle within the wider context of black activism and violent revolution enabled him to assume an influential position within the party. As the Black Panther Party's involvement in the San Rafael shoot-out reflects, Jackson and the Soledad Brothers were at the center of ideological battles within the party. The BPP's commitment to African American prisoners was established early on, but it was the increasing level of police harassment and prosecutions of members that drew the party toward the concept of the prison as a site of political struggle. As ever-more members were designated 'political prisoners', so Jackson's status as convict-turned-revolutionary grew. Ultimately, therefore, Jackson's appeal transcended his identity as a convict; he came to symbolize the plight of poor black men throughout America who struggled against the poverty and injustice of ghetto life. As head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Roy Wilkins, observed, 'He was a member of that great nonwhite fraternity whose brothers have suffered a wide variety of deprivations because the law has first looked at their skins'.<sup>99</sup>

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99. 'Two Standards of U.S. Justice', *New York Times* (6 September 1971); 'Is America at

